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Critics'

THEATRE REVIEWS

1942

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†"Without Love" opened Tuesday, November 10th, at the St. James Theatre.
†"Mr. Sycamore" opened Friday, November 13th, at the Guild Theatre.

THEATRE REVIEWS IS A COMPLETE GUIDE AND RECORD TO THE NEW YORK SHOWS

Critics' Theatre Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York papers

NEW YORK SUN
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK JOURNAL AMERICAN

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"Mr. Sycamore"

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
November 15, 1942

Stuart Erwin Turns Into a Tree

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

"IT'S WHAT they call whimsy," a lady told her escort at Friday night's premiere. It certainly isn't realism—this tale of a foot-sore and job-hating postman who decides it would be nice to turn into a tree. For, mind you, he actually turns into one, through one of those mighty efforts of will that wishy-washy people like myself so deeply envy. He plants himself squarely in the back yard and in no time takes on roots and bark, and then sprouts leaves at the fingertips, and finally offers restful shade to his wife and fellow-townsmen. At the end, there is even a little birdhouse where his right elbow used to be.

The whole thing, I am bound to say, is much better than you might suppose. The spectacle of John Gwilt is made comic rather than cosmic. There is nothing moonlit or woodlandish about the whimsy, and no attempt to make the postman symbolize anything fancier than a slightly peculiar human being. There is a constant supply of village scoffers to keep things homely and humorous with their puns and wisecracks. Miss Frings has robbed whimsy of its essential horror, and for that she is to be congratulated.

* * *

But *Mr. Sycamore* is still too flimsy a play, too undramatic a fantasy, too protracted a treatment of a single idea, to be fun for any length of time. Neither the reactions of the flabbergasted villagers, nor the sight of Stuart Erwin acquiring foliage, provides very juicy rewards. A tree, for one thing, is so unlike a man that—though that was just why the postman wanted to be one—it offers no amusing analogies. David Garnett hit on a much livelier and more dramatic idea, years ago, with his novelette *Lady Into Fox*, for the spectacle of a vixenish wife who developed four legs and a bushy tail offered real sport compared to which the postman's transformation is mere statuary.

Moreover, Miss Frings has failed to squeeze any really pungent satire out of her conceit. She has, at most, got some laughs out of the reactions of a bunch of literal-minded villagers to an unusual event. But the villagers would have been almost as incredulous and scornful had the butcher decided to paint murals.

Making his Broadway debut, Stuart Erwin of the movies plays the postman with engaging simplicity. Lillian Gish makes (no easy thing in the circumstances) a very understanding wife. There are good performances also by Enid Markey, Otto Hulett, Leona Powers and John Philliber, pleasant direction by Lester Vail, and nice sets by Samuel Leve. The only trouble is that the play stops growing long before the tree does.

'MR. SYCAMORE'

A play in eight scenes by Ketti Frings, based on a story by Robert Ayre; directed by Lester Vail; settings by Samuel Leve; presented by the Theater Guild at the Guild Theater on November 13, 1942. The cast:

Tom Burton	Harry Townes
Ned Fish	Harry Sheppard
John Gwilt	Stuart Erwin
Myrtle Staines	Leona Powers
Abner Coote	John Philliber
Estelle Benlow	Enid Markey
Julie Fish	Louise McBride
Albert Fernfield	Buddy Swan
Mr. Fernfield	Walter Appler
Fletcher Pingpank	Franklyn Fox
Reverend Doctor Doody	Russell Collins
Jane Gwilt	Lillian Gish
Fred Staines	Otto Hulett
First Milkman	Ernest Theiss
Second Milkman	Kenneth Hayden
Third Milkman	Rupert Pole
Mr. Oikle	Albert Bergh
Emily	Mary Heckart
Mr. Hammond	Jed Dooley
Daisy Staines	Pearl Herzog
Mr. Hoop	Ray J. Largay
Mr. Fink	Harry Believer

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
November 14, 1942

Lillian Gish and Stuart Erwin Star in Dramatization of Ayre's Story

By JOHN ANDERSON

NOT since the Theatre Guild lived down by the old Milne stream has it tried such intellectual pat-a-cake as it played last night at the Guild theatre where it presented "Mr. Sycamore" with Lillian Gish and Stuart Erwin. It would have been more fun and probably more sensible if the Guild (being that desperate for scripts) had just sat up on the stage and read the funny-papers to us for two hours and a half, accompanied by lantern slides and topped off with a pop-corn and marshmallow roast.

Certainly in Ketti Frings' dramatization of Robert Ayre's short story there is plenty of marshmallow and plenty of corn. Its soggy fantasy becomes a bog, its whimsy turns into a sort of coy idiocy and the whole thing is not only disenchanting but slightly embarrassing.

As a story Mr. Ayre's little yarn probably had its ingratiating qualities but they seem hardly substantial enough for a full-length play, even the sketchily episodic play Miss Frings has wrought. For it is essentially a small anecdote, a fable about a miracle worked by a U. S. Mailman upon himself, and its translation to the stage has left it not only skimpy but heavy-handed.

An Affable Tree

What John Gwilt the postman did that made him so remarkable was to turn himself into a nice, quietly affable sycamore tree, a sycamore tree that winked its leaves when it was pleased and gave the arboreally widowed Mrs. Gwilt a feeling of peace and dignity. She liked to sit under her husband's shade, and feel the ex-Mr. Gwilt's spreading roots as they clung strongly to the earth.

Doubtless the Guild's incorporated brains figured out that this odd fantasy would soothe the populace and produce noble thoughts in a war-troubled world. People might believe, as Mr. Gwilt did, that if a man can turn himself into a tree he can do anything. Or they might conclude that if the world is in such a state that only trees are any good, then the human race is not worth bothering about, and we may as well rush off and join the placid arboretums, no longer shedding tears, but merely leaves.

As one who has the deepest respect for trees, who has, indeed, many fine friends among them, I suspected that when the weary Mr. Gwilt retreated to his bark, his foliage, and his cambium layers he was a defeatest and a coward, and a blemish upon the name of Herodotus. He had betrayed the grand promise about the "appointed rounds"; he had betrayed the very glue on the postage stamps. He couldn't stick it. And getting right down to brass tacks he looked hopelessly silly as he stood rooted in the stage, part man, part vegetable, with little leaves sprouting off his manicure.

Fundamentally, of course, it is not an inspiring idea, and a suitable miracle is bound to be that or nothing. Miss Frings and the Guild have tried desperately to make the Gwilt tree-worship a matter of imaginative beauty but not even the warmth and sincerity of Mr. Erwin's performance as the little postman whose bark was better than his bite, can make it seem anything except foolishly childish and gently tiresome.

Miss Gish is excellent as the tree-widow, especially in the final scene where the radiant peace she bestows on the stage says more for trees than the rest of the play put together. Enid Markey, Otto Hulett and Russell Collins all help enormously in their odd assignments, and John Philliber does a superb job with the one really amusing scene in the play, when he describes what I suppose you would call Mr. Gwilt's leaving-out party.

The Guild has lavished an elaborate production on the play, with some clever settings by Samuel Leve, but I just couldn't take it.

This twig can be bent just so far.

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
November 14, 1942

Mailman Into Tree

By HOWARD BARNES

STAGE fantasy has rarely been more sheer than it is in "Mr. Sycamore." This play by Ketti Frings merely describes the metamorphosis of a tired postman into a tree. Since it was the fellow's own idea, in his quest for peace and quiet in a troubled world, there are a number of fey overtones in the new Theater Guild offering. Since Stuart Erwin plays the title role with tremendous skill and sympathy, the show has many moments of dramatic warmth and delight. On the whole it worries a fanciful notion to death.

* * *

The point is that "Mr. Sycamore" states its theme at the outset and then is content to expand it in a pedestrian and frequently static pattern. The idea of a mailman, digging himself in behind his small town home and willing himself into a sycamore, has its comical aspects. It offers an obvious chance to comment on human nature, as the hero's wife and friends react to his plunge into the vegetable world. The piece has its funny moments and a certain gab philosophical underlining. It never rises to the true dimensions of dramatic fantasy.

* * *

My hunch is that it must have been far more captivating in the original Robert Ayre story than it is in theatrical terms. For as it stands, "Mr. Sycamore" is lean on exciting elaboration. One almost wishes that some of the townspeople in the show would take a chop at the letter carrier turned tree, to find out how he would feel about peace with a cold winter in prospect. In any case, it is a very fragile comedy, to which you must bring much on your own account if you wish to be genuinely entertained.

* * *

The cast contributes far more than the author to the production. Mr. Erwin, here from a long term of movie acting, is magnificent as the chap who would rather grow leaves and bark than scram to the South Seas. He points up every accent of the fantasy in scene after scene, although he is stuck in the center of the stage for most of the time, growing roots and confounding his small-town neighbors. Lillian Gish is not far behind him in the role of the postman's wife, who is first indignant and then happy about the metamorphosis. You cannot fail to fall under her quiet charm.

* * *

The other players act as though "Mr. Sycamore" really meant something more than its tiny central conceit. Enid Markey is excellent as the old maid librarian, who writes a poem commemorating the miracle of the play. John Philliber gives a wry portrayal of a village bum who ponders over the event, and Leona Powers, Otto Hulett and the remaining members of a large and competent cast are always aware and assured. The staging by Lester Vail is as artful as the material permits, and the Samuel Leve settings are first rate. "Mr. Sycamore" is sheer fantasy, but there is not enough fantasy to make a satisfactory theatrical entertainment.

"Mr. Sycamore"

NEW YORK POST
November 14, 1942

"Mr. Sycamore"—A Weary Postman Becomes A Tree—at the Guild

By WILELLA WALDORF

"WELL, anyway it was different," remarked a Theatre Guild subscriber to his wife as they left the Guild Theatre last night after the premiere of "Mr. Sycamore."

"Mr. Sycamore" is a comedy about a miracle in a small town. A postman named John Gwilt, sick of trudging the streets delivering mail for twenty years, longs to withdraw into a world of peace and dignity. In reading Greek mythology, he has been greatly impressed with the legend of Philemon and Baucis. He decides to leave the Post Office flat, plant himself in his own backyard and turn into a tree.

The townsfolk, of course, are morbidly interested. His wife, in tears, applies mustard plasters to his chest when the first night with his feet in the ground results in a cold. The local preacher accused him of sin against the Lord—only God can make a tree. His next door neighbor, a regular card, advises him to get "all spruced up," and roars with laughter at his own joke.

When the strain of it all becomes too much for him, he shakes the earth from his feet and starts putting on shoes and stockings again—but a newspaper lies open on the back porch. After a glance at its headlines, he marches off and sticks his feet back in the ground. The next time he tries to get out—after a nightmare in which he sees his wife, a widow, marrying the local insurance agent—it is too late. He has taken root. It just goes to show what a strong will can accomplish in spite of everything.

A Fellow Who Wants to Get Away From It All

"Mr. Sycamore" is not a play that will attract more than a limited public, and no doubt the Guild should be congratulated for its temerity in producing what is obviously not destined to become a smash hit. After some dull stretches of small-town chatter, however, it develops a quiet charm that is curiously beguiling, and the simple saga of a philosophical fellow who wants to get away from man and all his works has an undeniably appealing quality in times like these.

The play, which Ketti Frings has made from a magazine story by Robert Ayre, will remind persistent theatre-goers now and again of "Father Malachy's Miracle," "On Borrowed Time" and of "Our Town." It is not, however, particularly profound, nor does it seek to explore with any great avidity the church's attitude toward miracles. It is just a mild comedy of small-town folk and the easy-going, good-natured, commercial-minded way in which they accept their neighbor's metamorphosis from the animal to the vegetable kingdom in the pursuit of peace and dignity.

Stuart Erwin and Lillian Gish Head a Good Cast

Stuart Erwin of the films, making his Broadway debut as the postman who regards trees as creations far nobler than men, gives a quiet but appealing performance as the postman. Lillian Gish is warmly human as the bewildered wife who finally comes around to her husband's way of thinking. Her vocal powers seem to improve with each Broadway appearance. She has done a great deal with her voice since she emerged from the films to play "Uncle Vanya."

The small-town types are excellently played for the most part. John Philliber as old Abner is a joy every minute he is on the stage. Enid Markey as the poetess-librarian does a typical Enid Markey role with her customary ease, aided by Longfellow, a resigned West Highland terrier. Otto Hulett as the wise-cracking neighbor, Russell Collins as the local clergyman, and Harry Sheppard as Mr. Fish are others that we recall pleasantly from the long cast.

Lester Vail, as director, handled a difficult task with skill, the nightmare scene being especially well done. Samuel Leve's setting had a pleasant toyshop charm.

"Mr. Sycamore" will bore sophisticates profoundly, but it should have a certain appeal for simple people who are inclined to be a bit fed up with mankind, but like peace and quiet and dogs and cats—and trees.

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
November 14, 1942

Obscure Actor Steals the Show at the Guild

By BURTON RASCOE

JOHN PHILLIBER, an obscure actor who has been on the stage (when he could get work) since 1893—nearly 50 years—ran away with the show last night at the Guild Theater in a minor bit against a field of 31 actors, all of them good, a half dozen of them excellent and three of them (Lillian Gish, Stuart Erwin and Enid Markey) topnotch actors of the stage and screen who gave their best, which in each case was a very good best indeed.

It is no disparagement of the fine performance given by the other members of the cast to say that Mr. Philliber simply outshone them by the utter conviction he carried in his brief part. All of them were mighty fine actors, but still they were actors, whereas Mr. Philliber was a man who (honest to God!) had just seen Stuart Erwin turn into a tree before his very eyes, somewhere off stage, and he was excited as hell about what he had seen. From Mr. Philliber's report you really believe that what he says happened . . . until the curtain goes up on the next scene and there is Stuart Erwin standing in the middle of the stage with a kind of papier-mache skirt on, the skirt painted to resemble the trunk of a tree, and Mr. Erwin pretending that the lower half of him is a sycamore and that the upper half soon will be, which you don't believe for a minute.

* * *

Rest Is Anticlimax

I know we'd have missed the fun of the next two scenes and that some of us would have been even more mystified than we were anyhow about the point of the play if the evening had ended with Mr. Philliber's triumph, but I wish it had. (To tell you a good one on me: I thought the play HAD ended there and had grabbed my hat and coat and was about to streak up the aisle when my wife jerked me back into my seat.) For the rest of the show was anticlimax; the illusion Mr. Philliber had created vanished and all the other actors were actors again in a pleasing stage scene designed by Samuel Leve to represent a backyard in a small town.

I expect to receive formal notice on Monday from the Drama Critics Benevolent and Protective Sodality and Saturday Night Beer Club that I have been expelled from membership for conduct unbecoming a dramatic critic. The first article in the rules of membership is that no member of the association and club shall indulge in handclapping or other means of applause at a performance in a theater at any time, whatever the excuse or occasion, on pain of expulsion. (We made that rule so that the other members of the first-night audiences could identify us as dramatic critics; if everybody else in the house is wildly beating his palms together and you spot eight or 10 glum fellows who are not, those eight or 10 are all dramatic critics.) I not only indulged in applause for Mr. Philliber; I led it: the case against me is serious.

* * *

Anything But a Fool-Proof Part

Mr. Philliber's triumph was all the more astonishing in that it was far from being a fool-proof part. In fact the part as written (as you may judge by the fact that the name given him in the play is Abner Coote, a low comedy name) offered every opportunity for someone to play it for laughs and ham it up awful; it is that of the town-loafer comic type. Mr. Philliber made of it something beautiful and appealing.

The play is a fantasy called Mr. Sycamore, adroitly adapted to the stage by Ketti Frings from a somewhat famous short story in Story magazine by Robert Ayre. It was an extremely hard job that Miss Frings set for herself, and she managed it far better than anybody would have reason to susnect it could be. Miss Frings calls her play The Saga of John Gwilt in Eight Verses. By "verses" she means "scenes"; but her idea is that you are to treat the play as a poem and not as something that happened or might happen in real life: it is a fantasy of wish-fulfillment with satirical overtones.

* * *

Stuart Erwin Wants to be a Tree

Stuart Erwin is a postman who has always been kind to everybody. He has made his rounds for years without missing a day, and then suddenly he begins acting queer after reading books on Greek mythology. He is especially hipped on the story of Philemon and Baucis and begins toying with the notion of turning himself into a tree.

The reason he wants to be a tree is to get away from family quarrels, man's cruelty to man, the selfishness, hypocrisy, little mindedness, limited aspirations, limited opportunities, the vulgarity and coarseness of a gossipy small town. He wishes to transcend his humdrum existence, and from dwelling upon that idea he changes character (rather inexplicably) and you see that he hates everybody he knows except a poor, silly old-maid poetess (admirably limned by Enid Markey) and has a low opinion of the whole human race generally—a species, to his mind, vastly inferior to trees in looks, habits, soul and dignity.

* * *

He Begins to Plant Himself

Fired by his conviction he begins to plant himself in his backyard while the village goes agog with gossip about his insanity; his very wifely wife is frantic; the town skeptic thinks he is publicity mad but might draw paying crowds like a flagpole sitter, and therefore stakes out the concession. Only the poetess sees in what he is doing something inspired and beautiful. He has a hard time "turning" himself, and before achieving the miracle he keeps on slipping back into earthbound ways —including displays of the emotion of jealousy. He is about to give up when one glance at the headlines of a discarded newspaper determines him to pursue his plan to its successful conclusion. In the final scene he is a towering sycamore tree under which his wife sits ecstatically communing with him; he is a legend, attested to by the townfolk but scoffed at by others.

* * *

A Job for Mr. Saroyan

I don't know what it all means, but I found it thoroughly enjoyable. Mr. Erwin broadens his stature as an actor in a role which must have been difficult to play. Miss Gish was effective as the solicitous wife, and she has a couple of scenes that would be genuinely moving except for the mixed moods of the play. Special mention should also be made of Leona Powers as the village gossip who henpecks her husband, Otto Hulett as the boisterous card who laughs loudest at his own feeble witticisms and Russell Collins as the pastor.

One reason you may be bothered by the play is that the author was unable to make up her mind whether the villagers were all as terrible as the postman thinks they are or whether they are just poor, lovable, bewildered souls who merit your sympathy as well as your scorn and pity. But, even so, the play is entertaining throughout. There are chuckles, laughs, keen observations and pointed satire. And there's Mr. Philliber to give you one of the nicest thrills you have ever had in the theater. Somebody should write a whole play for him. William Saroyan probably will.

"Mr. Sycamore"

NEW YORK TIMES
November 14, 1942

THE PLAY IN REVIEW
"Mr. Sycamore"

By BROOKS ATKINSON

NOT having produced a single new play since Tuesday evening, the Theatre Guild broke the spell by putting on "Mr. Sycamore" at the Guild Theatre last evening. Ketti Frings, author of "Hold Back the Dawn," has written a mildly imaginative tree fable that is based on a short story by Robert Ayre; and Lillian Gish and Stuart Erwin are acting it as generously as if it were the work of La Fontaine.

In bold prose, it is the story of a disgruntled though observant postman who decides to take leave of this troublesome world and turn himself into a tree—tall, stately, beautiful and impersonal. Writing a play on an odd theme like that is a neat trick if Mrs. Frings can do it. Although she has done a good deal of it, and some of the actors have done even more, she has not done quite enough to write a play that blossoms and fills the theatre with either mirth or loveliness.

* * *

Most of it is a loosely-knit comedy about the social aberration of a man who, prompted by the village poetess, decided to become a tree. John Gwilt, the postman, is tired of the pettiness and squalor of current life. He admires trees and covets their lofty glory. Having read of the legend of Philemon and Baucis, he digs a hole in his backyard, plants his feet in it, and in good time takes roots and grows into a tree. In the last scene he is a green-leafed sycamore, spreading his branches over the bench where his wife and his friends fondly sit in the shade.

Give Mrs. Frings credit for having tried something original and having stirred up some unhackneyed humor. In John Gwilt and his wife she has also written two remarkably interesting characters. For John is not only independent and courageous but also a man of native fine spirit, and his wife has enough sympathy to understand what he is trying to do and to encourage him in the face of town ridicule. Mr. Erwin, a screen actor, plays the part of the postman with a frank, wholesome combination of modesty and valor, and would be a good man to have in the theatre permanently.

As for Miss Gish, who plays the wife, she is a remarkable actress who can penetrate a character with extraordinary insight. There is nothing spectacular about her acting of this part. But every moment of it is filled with the fine integrity of a human character. It is personally humble, and it is beautifully recreated and wonderfully well expressed on the stage.

* * *

But to return to Mrs. Frings' play: What can one expect of a fable of this kind? For one does expect something of genuine distinction out of it—social satire or a great triumph of mind over matter or of spirit over human limitations. John Gwilt does become a tree; there is no denying that. But it seems to this playgoer that Mrs. Frings does not write with sufficient imagination to give her play wings. She sketches in the ordinary comedy of local characters who come to scoff. But not very many of them remain to pray. For Mrs. Frings does not seem able to develop her idea with either the satire or the spiritual passion that would transmit it into a vibrant work of art.

Apart from the acting of Miss Gish and Mr. Erwin, most of the performance is on the humdrum side. Otto Hulett does an excellent bit as a fatuous ass who learns to have respect for his betters at the end. As a town gossip John Philliber catches a note or two of the wonder that should underlie the whole play. Enid Markey contributes some character acting to the part of the poetess. As the alarmed and infuriated parson, Russell Collins is amusing. Leona Powers and Franklyn Fox play town gossips with shrewd humor.

But it seems to this playgoer that neither Samuel Leve's settings nor the performance as a whole are creatively imaginative. "Mr. Sycamore" needs a fourth dimension behind the three dimensions of the ordinary realistic stage.

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
November 14, 1942

"Mr. Sycamore" Is a Fantastic Comedy About A Man and a Tree

"Mr. Sycamore," comedy by Ketti Frings. Produced by The Theatre Guild at the Guild Theatre, New York, Nov. 13, 1942.

★ ★+

By BURNS MANTLE

AS I get the message of "Mr. Sycamore," the new comedy at the Guild, it relates the adventure of a small town postman who went so completely lame in the feet, and the head, after twenty years of delivering unimportant mail to uninteresting people that he prayed desperately to be changed into a tree.

To help his Creator perform this miracle he planted himself in his own backyard and, after a time, began to sprout. By the time he grew into the second act he had acquired a trunk and a few shoots.

In the third act he had achieved a stature that was the most rewarding scenic spectacle of the evening and was moving toward that messy state in which sycamore trees revel when they begin to shed their bark.

Otherwise I have nothing to report in favor of this play by a young lady named Ketti Frings. That it has hidden charms I am willing to be convinced, because otherwise I must temporarily lose faith in the judgment and good showman sense of Theresa Helburn and Lawrence Langner, two of my favorite show folk, who produced it.

Elusive Charms

But so far as I am concerned "Mr. Sycamore's" charms still remain hidden. They eluded me completely last evening. In fairness I must, however, report that there were those present who seemed to feel and to know that Miss Frings' play meant something jolly to someone, and was at least passably entertaining.

I am usually a good audience for fantasy. All I ask of it is that either I be tricked by the cleverness of its writing and acting into believing it, or at least into a state of wanting to believe it.

"Mr. Sycamore" only made me tired. I could extract nothing resembling a helpful philosophy from it or read an interesting symbolism into it. It seemed over written and dull.

Attractive Staging

Only a certain studied simplicity in the staging and the acting was cheering. Lillian Gish, playing one of her appealingly human wives, was an inspiring helpmate for Stuart Erwin, a wholesome and simple human blessed with a sense of comedy he has little or no chance to employ in this play. Mr. Erwin is a favorite screen comedian.

These two were fine. Enid Markey, the eternal spinster who is forever threatening to return to her baby talk days, gave a shadowy sort of reality to the poetess who inspired the tree-man.

Such capable players as Otto Hulett, Russell Collins and Leona Powers struggled valiantly with porous material. The best of the laughs were Hulett's. John Philliber had a scene as an excited old fellow that he played splendidly. Franklyn Fox, Harry Townes and Harry Sheppard were helpful.

The settings by Samuel Leve are charming. The direction by Lester Vail is no more uncertain than the text he had to work with. Miss Frings took the story from a story by Robert Ayre. Two stars for the play. A plus count for the production.

NEW YORK SUN
November 14, 1942

'Mr. Sycamore,' a Small Fantasy, Opens at The Guild Theater

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

A SMALL, gentle fantasy about a tired mail carrier who turned himself into a tree was affectionately played last evening at the Guild Theater. It is called "Mr. Sycamore," Miss Ketti Frings contrived it on the basis of a story by Robert Ayre and it is not for those who prefer the robust in drama. "Mr. Sycamore" is a tiny fancy shared by Miss Frings and Mr. Ayre. It is a miracle treated whimsically.

Gentle amusement is to be derived from it by those who are willing to be as easy-going as the author. The story is evidently slight. John Gwilt grew fully tired one day of carrying the mail and decided to plant himself in his own back yard and become a tree, acquiring at once stature, dignity and peace. The town pastor, the Rev. Dr. Doody, was displeased by this; the town barber joked heartily; old Mr. Fish was sarcastically amused. Mr. Pingpank saw in the metamorphosis a chance to entrap Mrs. Gwilt, whom he had long admired; Mr. Hoop thought, erroneously as it turned out, that Mr. Gwilt's achievement would make the town famous; Mr. Oikle tried to persuade Mr. Gwilt, who turned into a tree a little at a time and for quite a while was stuck with only a lower trunk, to give the whole thing up. The town, incidentally, was named Smeed.

It is, it will be gathered, a play about people with funny names—whimsically funny names. It does not particularly turn fantasy into comment; in effect, it says that trees are fine things and that there is less to be said about people. It is only a gently entertaining story, told on the stage with no great animation. The villagers are amusing. A dream sequence, which almost makes Mr. Gwilt give up his arboreal ambitions, is mildly eerie. Many of the characters come tenderly, comically to life, since the author has affection for people and recognizes their variety. But it would be foolish to argue that even these pleasant things make "Mr. Sycamore" a stimulating fantasy. "Mr. Sycamore" has quality without vigor. It is unhackneyed, but it is also tepid, and I am afraid it only just misses being dull.

If it misses, the acting gets much of the credit. Miss Lillian Gish plays Mrs. Gwilt—or Mrs. Sycamore?—with quick, light tenderness. Stuart Erwin, captured from the movies, acts the title role with convincing simplicity and does not seem handicapped by being, most of the time, rooted in the center of the stage. John Philliber, who acts the part of a tottering herald of the miraculous, does a fine, funny job. There are excellent performances by Otto Hulett, Russell Collins, Enid Markey—as a poetess who celebrates the miracle—Leona Powers and half a dozen others. "Mr. Sycamore" needs everything they can give it, certainly. I guess it needs even more.

"Without Love"

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
November 11, 1942

Katharine Hepburn Is Happy Playing Barry's 'Without Love'

"Without Love," comedy by Philip Barry. Produced by The Theatre Guild at the St. James Theatre, New York, Nov. 10, 1942.

★ ★ ★

By BURNS MANTLE

IT IS fun watching Katharine Hepburn and Elliott Nugent play "Without Love." They are both interesting individualists. Neither has any great liking for the conventional patterns of the stage. Neither is romantic in any accepted stage sense. And both are intelligently adaptable to any reasonable stage job.

Philip Barry, whose play it is, knows his Hepburn as well as an earlier Barrie knew his Maude Adams. He wrote "Philadelphia Story" for Katharine three seasons ago, and with it helped her to a stage stardom equalling the popularity of a screen career that has not often been equalled.

Now he has written this second comedy, in which he has made her a lightly strident Washington widow who clings to her Yankee childhood with sufficient tenacity to explode an occasional "By gum!"

That, it seems to me, is a fairly tough assignment. But again Miss Hepburn is able to turn it definitely to her advantage.

Happily, she is also a type of Yankee heroine who can on occasion produce a decidedly appealing girlish charm.

The romance in which her ice-bound heart is gradually melted is peculiarly suited to her style and she is happy playing it.

All of which adds up to the reasonable conclusion that the Hepburn following is going to be well pleased with "Without Love."

Mr. Barry, it seems, is also interested in writing a little something in the way of symbolical politics into his comedy.

He offers Mr. Nugent as an ardent young Illinois Irishman who would, if he could, bring about a better understanding between the Irish and their British irritants.

He would have the, to him, short-sighted Nationalists of Eire throw in their lot with their ancient foes and thus do their bit toward achieving a liberty about which they talk endlessly.

"When are you Irish going to quit acting so damned British?" he demands, disgustedly.

In the end he is able to bring certain influential parties together and it may be they were responsible for the later establishment of the camps for the Yanks in Ulster.

In the main, however, "Without Love" is concerned with a compact made by Jamie Rowan, widowed and rich, and Patrick Jamieson, a roving and reformed economist.

Interesting Compact

Patrick starts by bringing one of Jamie's friends home drunk. He continues by insulting Jamie's guests and even Jamie herself. This greatly interests her in the young man. Gentlemen so seldom insult rich and personable widows.

Their meeting ends in an agreement that, because they can be more helpful to each other married than single, they will marry—without love and the involvements of sex. Each will be privileged to live his own life and travel his own roads.

You, of course, know very well how that works out. The mutual capitulation of Patrick and Jamie in the end is a bit on the theatre side, but no one greatly cares.

Miss Hepburn is playing, as noted, with flashes of charm and a nice sense of stage assurance. Mr. Nugent is his honest self, than which he never need try to be anything else so far as this department is concerned.

There are several well-played supporting roles—a free lady with a sharp tongue by Audrey Christie, a couple of official Washingtonians by Robert Shayne and Royal Beal, and a pleasant juvenile by Tony Hickley.

The settings are by Robert Edmond Jones and handsome. The staging originally was by Robert Sinclair, who has gone soldiering. Arthur Hopkins took over for this season's production. Last night's audience was happy and enthused.

NEW YORK POST
November 11, 1942

"Without Love" Brings Katharine Hepburn to Broadway—In Person

By WILELLA WALDORF

THE Theatre Guild, which found Katharine Hepburn and Philip Barry a tremendously lucrative combination in "The Philadelphia Story" a couple of years ago, opened its 25th subscription season last night at the St. James Theatre with Miss Hepburn in a new Barry comedy entitled "Without Love."

"The Philadelphia Story," as we recall it, was remarkable chiefly for the fact that it displayed Miss Hepburn in a variety of fetching attitudes and flowing costumes. It was second-rate Barry.

"Without Love" seems longer, duller and sillier. It is, we should say, third-rate Barry. Except for two or three fairly diverting sequences with something of the old Barry flavor, it is immersed in a stuffy discussion of the Anglo-Irish situation.

Elliott Nugent, who plays Miss Hepburn's platonic husband, remarks at one point that Washington D. C. is not only bound up in red tape—but in red adhesive tape. "Without Love" gets stuck in it quite often.

Platonic Marriage and Off-Stage Music

Mr. Nugent, an Irish-American who has spent many years abroad, comes steaming into the National Capital (May, 1940) bent upon doing something to prevent Hitler from invading England via Ireland.

He meets a Senator's daughter from the rockbound state of Maine, and a marriage of convenience follows. Both are through, they say, with love. Such a thing is not even to be mentioned between them. Mr. Barry has then merely to follow the usual plot course, winding up with what is known in cinema circles as the clinch.

He takes his time about it, for the interminable discussion of the Anglo-Irish unpleasantness goes on and on, interspersed with light dalliance over cocktails and a prodigious amount of off-stage piano playing with Mr. Nugent going through some very unconvincing motions over the keys.

Sometimes it is necessary to include one trying scene of this sort, but it is seldom that a playwright introduces so much piano playing when the actor in the part obviously doesn't know one note from another. "Without Love" is a generally phony play, and the behind-the-scenes musical effects only serve to make it seem phonier.

Miss Hepburn as an Actress

Miss Hepburn, whose presence in the role of the Senator's daughter is the sole excuse for staging the play, is a curiously self-conscious and artificial actress. She has, to be sure, improved greatly since "The Lake," but she still seems ill at ease much of the time—almost embarrassed to find herself behind the footlights.

There is an attractive coltish quality about her—a straightforward boyishness that is sometimes very charming, but her delivery is often flat and inexpressive. It should be said that last night she seemed to be suffering from a cold, which undoubtedly made it difficult for her to achieve some of the more subtle inflections she may have been striving for, but vocally she suggests a bright young dramatic school student who may one day master a very difficult art. Apparently she still finds it difficult to sustain a full evening of play-acting.

Miss Hepburn is sumptuously gowned by Valentina, the stage is elegantly set by Robert Edmond Jones, and Mr. Nugent, Audrey Christie and a competent cast of actors pretending to be people - about - Washington wrestle heroically with Mr. Barry's none too brilliant chatter.

As a gala personal appearance for Miss Hepburn, "Without Love" is doubtless a hit. As drama it is negligible.

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
November 11, 1942

Barry and Hepburn

By HOWARD BARNES

PHILIP BARRY is concerned with far more than whimsical witticisms in his new comedy, "Without Love" attempts, somewhat obliquely, to chart the zigzags of the public pulse during the last two years. For all of that, it is the wit and whimsy of this Theatre Guild production which makes it passably entertaining. It is when Katharine Hepburn and Elliott Nugent are fencing romantically in a brittle farce that the St. James Theater offering quickens into an amusing show. Mr. Barry's comments on the international situation are neither very apt nor very persuasive.

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It has been the author's notion to throw a pair of disillusioned lovers together in a marriage of the purest convenience. The man, with an Irish diplomatic background, goes out to joust against isolationism. The girl becomes conscious of the world she lives in and in the process falls desperately in love with her husband. Out of this dual theme a comedy of some import as well as gaiety might have been fashioned. You will have to settle for a bit of gaiety in "Without Love."

For the bold efforts of the hero to break down Eire's neutrality in a Washington girding for war are singularly unconvincing when they are not preposterous. It is good to see the drama take sideswipes at our prewar indifference to the state of the world, but it has to be done in more trenchant dramatic terms than are evident at the St. James. "Without Love" is about as challenging as a cream puff. It would have been considerably more delectable had it merely tried to be a light, bright comedy of manners.

* * *

In the latter vein it succeeds in being very delectable indeed on occasion. The Barry touch is as deft as ever when he is probing the polite and whimsical manifestations of human relations. His embattled Irishman and the young New England widow whom he marries in a solemn pact to renounce love, are delightful, well mannered and glib people. Their attempts to deny natural impulses are the source of no little merriment in the course of the play's seven scenes. The pity is that this simple love story was muddled up with pretentious preachments.

The performances point up this fact clearly. Miss Hepburn brings all of her casual, affected artistry to the part of the Senator's daughter, who eschews love after the tragic death of her young husband, but rediscovers its power in short order. She is never quite at ease, though, when the script dips into international profundities. The same goes for Nugent, who is generally first rate as the outspoken war monger, but slips in the dull scenes in which he is supposed to get Eire into the war.

* * *

Audrey Christie is fine as a Washington career girl and the other players realize all the brilliance of the sparkling passages in "Without Love." Incidentally, the Robert Edmond Jones sets are fine and Robert B. Sinclair's staging is knowing and easy. With these considerable ministrations "Without Love" might have been a rattling good comedy, but the author got sidetracked in subject matter which constantly eludes him and breaks the spell of a witty farce.

"Without Love"

NEW YORK SUN
November 11, 1942

'Without Love,' With Katharine Hepburn, Is Offered at the St. James

By RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

LOVE and Ireland concern Philip Barry in "Without Love," which opened at the St. James last evening. Of the former, Mr. Barry approves without qualification, so that in the end Katharine Hepburn and Elliott Nugent find each other's arms. About Ireland, Mr. Barry just seems sort of worried, feeling that it ought to behave differently about the war but also that there is much to be said on all sides.

Unfortunately, Mr. Barry's worry extends to his writing and "Without Love" becomes an oddly jerky play, not often suave as Barry comedies usually are and no oftener stimulating as his serious plays have sometimes been. It is a snatch here of romance, an awkward clutch a moment later at international politics. Inadequately explained characters enter and leave as if pulled by strings; about much of it there is a kind of artless abruptness, as if Mr. Barry's political hand did not know what his romantic hand was doing.

Mr. Barry is telling about Patrick Jamieson, who comes back from Europe in 1940 full of some sort of mission about Ireland. (Wants to make England and Ireland understand each other, Mr. Jamieson does; wants Ireland to cede bases and maybe get Ulster in return.) Jamieson meets Jamie Coe Rowan, who is a strange New England girl who never laughs and speaks with flat disinterest and is haunted by the memory of a brief, brightly happy marriage. Neither Mr. Jamieson nor Mrs. Rowan wants love any more. So they marry for companionship only—and Mr. Barry means "only."

You will, I think, have heard this before, but try to stop Mr. Barry. Or try to be surprised at the inevitable outcome, when considering that Mrs. Rowan is Miss Hepburn, whose fate it is on stage and screen to melt.

The simplicity of this story is not complicated, but interrupted, by the presence of other characters, two of whom represent Ireland and Britain, two of whom represent a somewhat more elemental love and one of whom represents a little mysteriously, the power of the United States Navy. They also, maybe, represent the power of an author to keep things going for three acts.

Naturally, Mr. Barry's confused story telling cannot always defeat him. Often he is easily witty, as he so frequently was when he believed it was a time for comedy. A time or two he achieves scenes effortless and graceful, with words skimming and fancy fluttering. But it does not seem to me that there are enough of these charms in "Without Love," or even that Miss Hepburn and the others in the cast make up for their playwright's stumbles.

Miss Hepburn's role is curiously underdeveloped in the writing and she does not, particularly at first, do much to develop it—except to rely on her highly individual intonations and movements, and on the special quality which makes her fascinating to watch even when she evidently isn't acting very well. She is freer and happier later, when the play is also running more easily. (The last act of "Without Love" is by far the best.) Mr. Nugent acts with his usual smoothness and with more when opportunity offers; Audrey Christie is fine right through and the others do pleasantly with the characters their author has tossed them. Mr. Barry usually tosses more expertly.

'WITHOUT LOVE'

A comedy in three acts by Philip Barry; staged by Robert B. Sinclair, with assistance from Arthur Hopkins; designed by Robert Edmond Jones; produced under the supervision of Lawrence Langner and Theresa Helburn by the Theater Guild on November 10, 1942, at the St. James Theater. The cast:

Patrick Jamieson ..... Elliott Nugent
Quentin Ladd ..... Tony Bickley
Anna ..... Emily Massey
Martha Ladd ..... Ellen Morgan
Jamie Coe Rowan .. Katharine Hepburn
Kitty Trimble ..... Audrey Christie
Peter Baillie ..... Robert Shayne
Paul Carrel ..... Sherling Oliver
Richard Hood ..... Robert Chisholm
Robert Emmet Riordan .. Nell Fitzgerald
Grant Vincent ..... Royal Beal

NEW YORK TIMES
November 11, 1942

Katharine Hepburn Appears in Barry's 'Without Love' to Open Twenty-fifth Season of Theatre Guild Presentations

By BROOKS ATKINSON

TO BEGIN its twenty-fifth subscription season the Theatre Guild offers Katharine Hepburn in Philip Barry's "Without Love," which was acted at the St. James last evening. Since Katharine Hepburn in Philip Barry's "The Philadelphia Story" ran on month after month in 1939, the Guild may know a successful combination when it has once tried it, and the subscribers seemed last evening to be in agreement.

But it is a combination that seems this time to be lacking in spontaneity. For Mr. Barry has written "Without Love" by rote on a "Beverly of Graustark" formula, adding for thickening some very solemn stuff about international affairs. As the unloved wife Miss Hepburn is giving a mechanical performance that is not without considerable gaucherie in the early scenes. In both the writing and the acting, "Without Love" is theatre on the surface of a vacuum.

For this time Mr. Barry has taken artificial comedy literally. He is writing about a serious-minded young American who comes back from Europe in 1940 with some ominous thoughts about the state of the nation. For purposes of comedy-making, Mr. Barry marries his young American to a rich young widow who is lonely, though interested in his mind. Being rational people, they naturally agree never to fall in love. This gives Mr. Barry the opportunity to caper around the shooting grounds of romance for two acts and a half and to plunge joyfully inside in the last scene.

Although the plot of "Without Love" is hardly more dashing than a musical comedy formula, a writer of humorous caprices can often offer compensations. At his best, Mr. Barry usually writes humorous lines that turn the world upside down with dancing gaiety. But the dialogue of "Without Love" is only intermittently amusing, and the comedy also has to carry around on its back some prodigious political arguments about Irish neutrality. Probably the hero of the comedy has something really momentous to contribute to foreign policy. But the political merry-go-round of Mr. Barry's play consists chiefly in gruff, fleeting words spoken over drinks by hurried men of affairs and an occasional remote adumbration from the White House. When the play is over, you are never quite sure what Mr. Barry's hero has been up to. You can only dread.

* * *

"Without Love" has been produced expensively, with settings by Robert Edmond Jones and costumes by Valentina. Robert Sinclair staged it last Spring, before he went into the Army, and Arthur Hopkins has directed the Autumn version. Even at her best, Miss Hepburn is not a virtuoso actress. As a wealthy Washington widow with a New England heritage, she has several stunning visual moments to contribute to "Without Love." But it is hard for her to sustain a scene in a trifling play that is generally uneventful.

Elliott Nugent plays the ambitious young American in an agreeably humorous style that is probably not particularly well suited to the character. As a secretary and confidante, Audrey Christie gives an altogether warm and likable performance. Things being as they are today, the Guild has not had much luck in hiring actors to play international bigwigs. There is a hollow sound to Mr. Barry's writing about foreign policy. The acting of these episodes is empty.

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
November 11, 1942

Katie Glitters in a Void

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

AS A PLAY, Mr. Barry's new comedy is now and then amusing, much oftener foolish and cute, and generally third-rate. As a vehicle for Katharine Hepburn it is, to say the least, eminently vehicular—rich in opportunity for Miss H. to purr fetchingly, to look stunning, and to glitter for long periods, below the freezing point. With Miss Hepburn and Mr. Nugent giving generously of themselves, *Without Love* should settle down at the St. James for a very satisfactory run.

If it's in no sense a very satisfactory play, the reason lies chiefly in Mr. Barry's unbelievably coy handling of his not very breathtaking plot and in his even coyer insistence on dosing light comedy with political symbolism. Mr. Barry, who once upon a time wrote witty plays, is now merely someone who now and again writes witty lines. The old touches of insight, the old gift of preserving the proper tone for social comedy has been replaced by cuteness, fancifulness and snob appeal. Add to this a play that is but intermittently sprightly, and what you have left is club soda masquerading as champagne.

* * *

Dealing with the snazzier side of Washington, *Without Love* introduces Miss Hepburn and Mr. Nugent as a lady and a gent who, for different reasons, are forever through with love. Her memories of her dead husband are too sweet, his of a girl who jilted him are too bitter. Out of their common aversion to romance they embark upon what used to be known as marriage in name only. Late in Act II, during one of the most insufferably arch scenes since the other Barrie was in his heyday, they modify their alliance to include the carnal. You may guess for yourself what blinding truth is brought home to them in the course of Act III.

* * *

This rising tide of passion, or plot as it is sometimes called, is garnished with some good wisecracks, some minor involutions of narrative, some people from the better embassies, and the aforementioned political symbolism. For Mr. Barry, being hot and bothered about Anglo-Irish relations in this war, sort of hints that if England and Eire would also embark on a marriage of convenience, they might well end up in each other's arms. That Miss Hepburn, who already symbolizes Bryn Mawr, the tonier side of New England, the chillier type of glamor girl and the couturier's delight, should also have to represent Britannia seems to me a trifle unfair, as well as a trifle unfortunate for the political stuff is all of it pretty silly.

* * *

Miss Hepburn, in a dazzling succession of frocks and peignoirs, continues to be cool, haughty and in due time radiant. Mr. Nugent plays opposite her with winning naturalness. Audrey Christie is pleasant in a smaller part, and the rest of the cast is adequate. I can't say as much for the play.